

15 pts

- ① Write a paragraph summarizing article
- ② Write a paragraph reaction to it
- ③ Who is Justin Zormelo?

KEVIN DURANT

- ④ What skills did Zormelo have Durant work on?
- ⑤ How does this article connect to the last basketball article we read?
- ⑥ Look at the chart below and analyze it

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On the day after the Heat won their 27th game in a row, Kevin Durant sat in a leather terminal chair next to a practice court and pointed toward the 90-degree angle at the upper-right corner of the key that represents the elbow. "See that spot," Durant said. "I used to shoot 38, 39 percent from there off the catch coming around pin-down screens." He paused for emphasis. "I'm up to 45, 46 percent now." Durant wore the satisfied expression of an MIT undergrad solving a partial differential equation. You could find dozens of basic or advanced statistics that attest to Durant's brilliance this season—starting with the obvious, that he became only the seventh player ever to exceed 50% shooting from the field, 40% from three-point range and 90% from the free throw line—but his preferred metric is far simpler. He wants what Miami has, and he's going to seize it one meticulously selected elbow jumper at a time.

The NBA's analytical revolution has been confined mainly to front offices. Numbers are dispensed to coaches, but rarely do they trickle down to players. Not many are interested, and of those who are, few can apply what they've learned mid-possession. Even the most stat-conscious general manager wouldn't want a point guard elevating for an open jumper on the left wing and thinking, *Oh no, I only shoot 38% here.* But Durant has hired his own

analytics expert. He tailors workouts to remedy numerical imbalances. He harps on efficiency more than a Prius dealer. To Durant, basketball is an orchard, and every shot an apple. "Let's say you've got 40 apples on your tree," Durant explains. "I could eat about 30 of them, but I've begun limiting myself to 15 or 16. Let's take the wide-open three and the post-up at the nail. Those are good apples. Let's throw out the pull-up three in transition and the step-back fadeaway. Those are rotten apples. The three at the top of the circle—that's an in-between apple. We only want the very best on the tree."

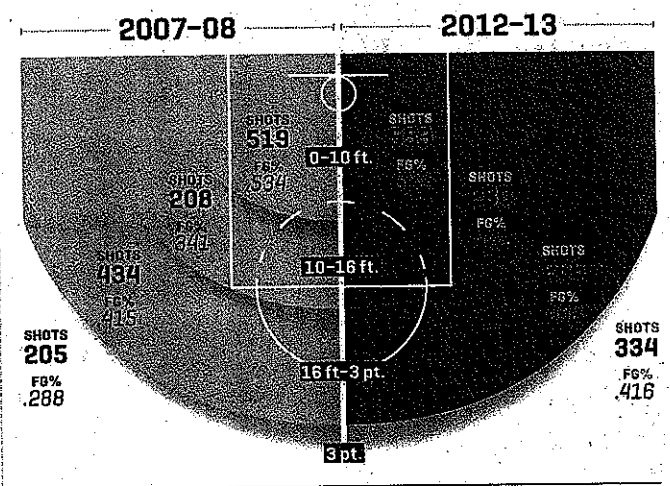
The Thunder did not win 27 straight games. They did not compile the best record. Durant will not capture the MVP award. All he and his teammates did was amass a season that defies comparison as well as arithmetic. They scored more points per game than last season even though they traded James Harden, who finished the season fifth in the NBA in scoring, five days before the opener. They led the league in free throws even though Harden gets to the line more than anybody. They posted the top point differential since the 2007-08 Celtics, improving in virtually every relevant category, including winning percentage. Their uptick makes no sense unless Durant was afforded more shots in Harden's absence, but the opposite occurred. He attempted the fewest field goals per 36 minutes of his career. He didn't even take the most shots on his team, trailing point guard Russell Westbrook, and he seemed almost proud that his 28.1 points per game weren't enough to earn the scoring title for the fourth consecutive year. "He knows he can score," says Thunder coach Scott Brooks. "He's trying to score smarter."

Durant is lifting Oklahoma City as never before, with pocket passes instead of pull-ups, crossovers instead of fadeaways. He remains the most prolific marksman alive, unfurling his impossibly long arms to heights no perimeter defender can reach, but he has

ma City lost to Miami in the Finals last June, and Durant will surely be runner-up to LeBron James in the MVP balloting again. Durant is only 24 and is as respectful of James as a rival can be, but he's nobody's bridesmaid. "I've been second my whole life," Durant says. "I

## THE GUNSLINGER

Since the 2007-08 season, his first in the league, Durant has not only become a better shooter from all over the floor, but he's also gone a long way toward eliminating the least efficient shot in the game: the long two-pointer. As a result, his true shooting percentage (which factors in three-pointers and free throws) is a career-high .647.



become more than a gunner. He set career marks in efficiency rating, assists and every new-fangled form of shooting percentage. "Now he's helping the whole team," says 76ers point guard Royal Ivey, who spent the past two seasons with the Thunder. "Now he's a complete player." The Thunder are better because Durant is better. Of course, the Heat will be favored to repeat as champions, and deservedly so. But Oklahoma City has been undercutting conventional wisdom for six months.

NBA history is littered with stars who languish in another's shadow, notably Karl Malone, Charles Barkley, Patrick Ewing and Reggie Miller through the Michael Jordan reign. Oklaho-

was the second-best player in high school. I was the second pick in the draft. I've been second in the MVP voting three times. I came in second in the Finals. I'm tired of being second. I'm not going to settle for that. I'm done with it."

**J**ustin Zormelo doesn't have a formal title. He is part personal trainer and part shot doctor, part video analyst and part advance scout. "He's a stat geek," Durant says, expanding the job description. Zormelo sits in section 104 of Oklahoma City's Chesapeake Energy Arena, with an iPad that tells him in real time what percentage Duran

is shooting from the left corner and how many points per possession he is generating on post-ups. After games, he takes the iPad to Durant's house or hotel room and they watch clips of every play. Zormelo loads the footage onto Durant's computer in case he wants to see it again. "If I miss a lot of corner threes, that's what I work on the next morning before practice," Durant says. "If I'm not effective from the elbow in the post, I work on that." Zormelo keeps a journal of their sessions and has already filled two notebooks this season. Last year Zormelo noticed that Durant was more accurate from the left side of the court than the right, and they addressed the inconsistency. "Now he's actually weaker on the left," Zormelo says, "but we'll get that straightened out by the playoffs."

Zormelo, 29, was a student manager at Georgetown when Durant was a freshman at Texas, and they met during a predraft workout at Maryland that included Hoyas star Brandon Bowman. Durant embarked on his pro career and so did Zormelo, landing an internship with the Heat and a film-room job with the Bulls before launching a company called Best Ball Analytics in 2010 that has counted nearly 30 NBA players as clients. Zormelo kept in touch with Durant, occasionally e-mailing him cutups of shots. They bonded because Zormelo idolizes Larry Bird and Durant does, too.

Durant left a potential championship on the table in 2011, when Oklahoma City fell to Dallas in the Western Conference finals. About two weeks after the series, Durant scheduled his first workout with Zormelo in Washington, D.C. "I didn't sleep the night before," Zormelo remembers. "I was up until 4 a.m. asking my-

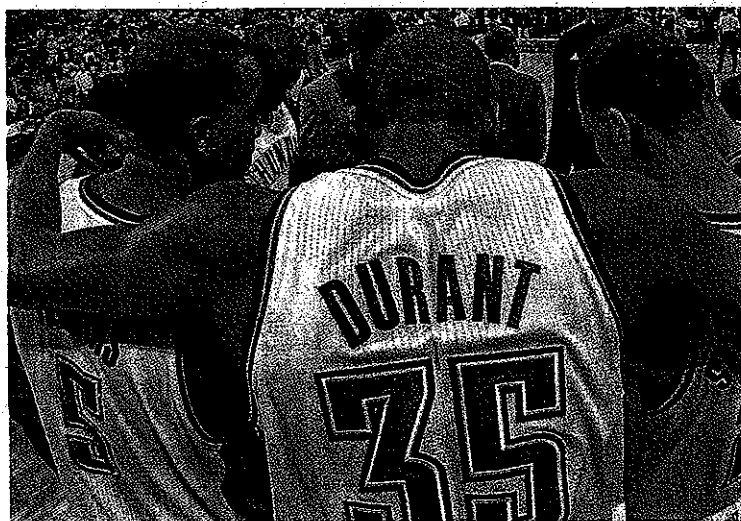
self, What am I going to tell the best scorer in the league that he doesn't already know?" They met at Yates Field House, where Georgetown practices, and Zormelo told Durant, "You're really good. But I think you can be the best player ever." Durant looked up. "Not the best scorer," Zormelo clarified. "The best player." It was a crucial distinction, considering Durant had just led the league in scoring for the second year in a row yet posted his lowest shooting percentage, three-point percentage and assist average since he was a rookie. He was only 22, so there was no public rebuke, but he could not stand to give away another title.

"He was getting double- and triple-teamed, and in order to win a championship, he needed to make better decisions with the ball," says former Thunder point guard Kevin Ollie, now the head coach at Connecticut. "He needed to find other things he could do besides force up shots. That was the incentive to change his pattern." Over several weeks Zormelo and Durant formulated a written plan focusing on ballhandling, passing and shot selection. They were transforming a sniper into a playmaker. Growing up, Durant dribbled down the street outside his grandmother's house in Capitol Heights, Md. He played point guard as a freshman at National Christian Academy in Fort Washington. He watched And1 DVDs to study the art of the crossover. "Where I'm from, you got to have the ball," Durant says. "That's how we do it. We streetball." But he sprouted five inches as a sophomore, from 6' 3" to 6' 8", and suddenly he was a forward. Though his stroke didn't suffer, his han-

dle did. "I still had the moves," Durant insists, "but I dribbled way too high."

He could compensate in high school, and even during his one season at Texas, but the NBA was changing to a league where the transcendent are freed from traditional positions and boundaries. When Portland was deciding between Durant and Ohio State center Greg Oden before the 2007

the NBA and its union were trying to negotiate a new collective bargaining agreement, Durant created an endless loop of YouTube videos with his preposterous scoring binges at East Coast pickup games. What the cameras didn't show were the drills he did during daily 6 a.m. workouts at Bryant Alternative High School in Alexandria, Va., with Zormelo pushing down on his shoulders to lower his



draft, Texas coach Rick Barnes copped a line that Bobby Knight used when the Blazers were debating between Jordan and center Sam Bowie in 1984. "He can be the best guard or he can be the best center," Barnes told G.M.'s. "It doesn't matter. Whatever you need, he'll do." The Trail Blazers selected Oden and Durant was taken second by Seattle, where coach P.J. Carlesimo started him at shooting guard. "Kevin could be all things," Carlesimo says, but back then he was too gangly to hold his spot or protect his dribble. Brooks replaced Carlesimo shortly after the franchise relocated to Oklahoma City the following season and wisely returned him to forward.

In the summer of 2011, as

dribble. Durant even tried to rebuild his crossover, but when the ball kicked off his high tops, he hurled it away in frustration. "I'm never really going to use this!" he hollered.

But at all those pickup games, he asked to play point guard, and in downtime he watched tapes of oversized creators like Bird and Magic Johnson. "Opponents are going to do anything to get the ball out of your hands," Zormelo told him. "They're going to make you drive and pass." Durant could typically beat double teams simply by raising his arms. Even though he is listed at 6' 9", he is more like 6' 11", with a 7' 5" wingspan and a release point over his head. The only defenders long enough to challenge his

jumper aren't normally allowed outside the paint. "Most guys can't shoot over the contested hand," says Brooks. "Not only can Kevin shoot over it, he uses it as a target. If anything, it lines him up." Durant didn't distinguish between good and bad shots, because through his eyes there was no such thing as a bad one. Every look was clean. "I had to tell him, 'If you have a good shot and I have a good

cally discarded two-point shots outside 17 feet. Brooks tells him on a near nightly basis, "KD, it's time. I need you to shoot now." Says Brooks, "To extend the apple metaphor, I'm now able to put him all over and get fruit." He isolates Durant at the three-point line, posts him up and uses him as the trigger man in the pick-and-roll. When defenders creep too close, Durant freezes them with

being with his build can do. If his progression reminds you of someone else's, well, that's probably not an accident.

**D**urant was 17 when LeBron James invited him into the Cavaliers' locker room at Washington's Verizon Center after a playoff game against the Wizards. "That's my guy," Durant says. "I looked up to him, and now I battle him." In a sense, the 2011 lockout was a boon for the NBA because it allowed the premier performers to explore new boundaries. James fortified his dribble, and so did Durant. James developed his post skills, and so did Durant. James studied his shot charts, vowing to eliminate inefficiencies, and so did Durant. James already passed like Magic, but Durant started to pass like Bird. They hopped on parallel evolutionary tracks, advancing in the same manner at the same time. When a quote from James is relayed—"He's my inspiration. We're driving one another"—Durant nods in approval. It's as if the finest poets in the world are also each other's muses.

"I don't watch a lot of other basketball away from the gym," Durant says. "But I do look at LeBron's box score. I want to see how many points, rebounds and assists he had, and how he shot from the field. If he had 30 points, nine rebounds and eight assists, I can tell you exactly how he did it, what type of shots he made and who he passed to." Durant and James take flak for their friendship, but it is based on a mutual appreciation of the craft. They

aren't hanging out at the club. They are feverishly one-upping each other from afar. "People see two young black basketball players at the top of their game and think we should clash," Durant says. "They want the conflict. They want the hate. They forget Bird cried for Magic. A friend was getting on me about this recently, and I said, 'Calm down. I'm not taking it easy on him. Don't you know I'm trying to destroy the guy every time I go on the court?'"

Oklahoma City beat Miami in Game 1 of last year's Finals and trailed by only two points with 10 seconds left in Game 2. Durant spun to the baseline and James appeared to hook his right arm, but no foul was called and Durant's shot bounced out. The Thunder did not win again, but Durant stood arm-in-arm with Westbrook and Harden at the end of the series, a tableau of defeat but also of a boundless future. Not one was over 23. Durant and Westbrook had already signed long-term contract extensions, and Harden was still a year from restricted free agency. But on Oct. 27, Oklahoma City had not agreed to an extension with Harden and sent him to Houston in a trade that threatened the very culture Durant built. For a player who attended four high schools, spent one year at Texas and one in Seattle, the Thunder signified the stability he lacked. "People tell you it's a business, but it's a brotherhood here," Durant says. "We draft guys and we grow together. We build a bond. When James left, we had to turn the family switch off."

In the first meeting after the deal, Brooks told his players, "We're not taking a step back." But everywhere else they heard otherwise. "My cousin texted me, 'I'm a Heat fan now,

## "I'm not taking it easy on [LeBron]. Don't you know I'm trying to destroy the guy every time I'm on the court?"

### BAND OF BROTHERS

Oklahoma City has done more than just stick together in the wake of Harden's departure, ranking first in scoring for much of the year before fading late to third—not bad for a franchise that hasn't led the league in that category in its 46-year history.

shot, I want you to take it," Brooks says. "But if you have a good shot and I have a great shot, you have to give it to me."

Ballhandling drills begat passing drills. Durant saw what the Thunder could accomplish if he took two hard dribbles and found an abandoned man in the corner. With Zormelo's research as a guide, Durant identified his sweetest spots at both elbows, both corners and the top of the key. From those happy places, he is doing the Thunder a disservice if he doesn't let fly, but outside of them he prefers to probe. He moves a half step slower so he can better see the floor.

This season Durant is averaging two fewer field goals and nearly two more assists than he did in 2011, and he has practi-

cally discarded two-point shots outside 17 feet. Brooks tells him on a near nightly basis, "KD, it's time. I need you to shoot now." Says Brooks, "To extend the apple metaphor, I'm now able to put him all over and get fruit." He isolates Durant at the three-point line, posts him up and uses him as the trigger man in the pick-and-roll. When defenders creep too close, Durant freezes them with

a crossover at his ankles or deploys a rip move that former Thunder forward Desmond Mason taught him four years ago to pick up fouls. "Remember when tall guys would come into the league and people would say, 'They handle like a guard!' but they never actually did handle like a guard?" says Thunder forward Nick Collison. "Kevin really does handle like a guard." Durant has become both facilitator and finisher, shuttling between the perimeter and the paint, stretching the limits of what we believe a human



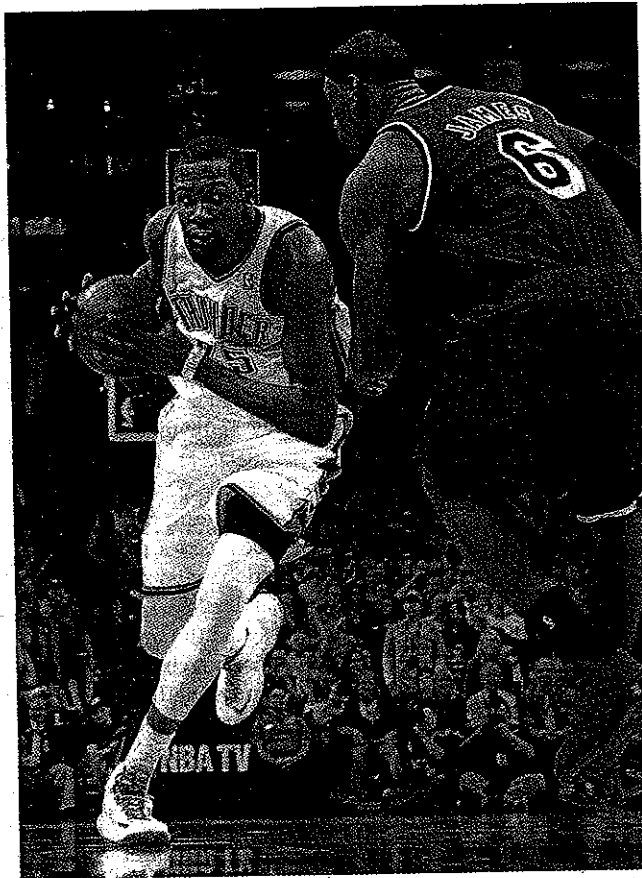
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but I still hope you make it to the Finals,” Durant recalls. “That’s my family! That’s my cousin!” He shakes his head at a small but lingering act of betrayal. “A lot of friends from home were talking about other teams, and I thought they were on our side. I don’t want to be angry or bitter, but it started to build up, and I took it out on my teammates.” Previously, if power forward Serge Ibaka blew a box-out, Durant would tell him, “It’s O.K. You’re going to get it next time.” But the stakes had risen. “You want to get to the Finals again, and you think everything should be perfect, and it’s not,” Durant says. “So I’d scream at him and pump my fist.”

Durant has picked up 12 technical fouls this season, more than twice as many as his previous career high, and he was ejected for the first time, in January, after arguing with referee Danny Crawford. “I’m rubbing off on him,” says Thunder center Kendrick Perkins, who keeps a standing 2 a.m. phone call with Durant every night to discuss the state of the team. “He’s getting a little edge on.” The techs dovetailed neatly with Nike’s “KD is Not Nice” marketing campaign, but they still don’t fit the recipient. Even after the ejection, Durant stopped to high-five kids sitting over the tunnel. “People get it confused and think you have to be a jerk to win,” he says. “But we all feed off positive energy. I’m a nice guy. I enjoy making people happy and brightening their day. If someone asks me for an autograph on the street, I don’t want to wave him off and tell him, ‘Hell, no.’ That’s not me. The last few months I’ve calmed down and had more fun. We can still get on each other, but there’s another way.”

Without Harden, Oklahoma City needed a new playmaker,



**“I’ve given up trying to figure out how to stop him,” says Rivers. “And I’m not kidding.”**

and Durant had spent more than a year preparing for the role. He just didn’t realize it at the time. “They were looking for somebody else to move the defense and handle the ball in pick-and-roll,” says a scout. “It turned out to be him.” When Durant was 20, the Thunder asked him to act 25, and now that he is nearly 25, the plan for his prime has come to fruition. He is the NBA’s best and perhaps only answer for James.

“I’ve given up trying to figure out how to stop him,” said Celtics coach Doc Rivers. “And I’m not kidding.”

On Nov. 24, four weeks after Harden left, the Thunder were a respectable but unremarkable 9-4 and nursing a five-point lead with one minute left in overtime at Philadelphia. Durant posted up on the right wing, bent at the waist, a step inside the perimeter. Dorrell Wright, the unfortunate 76er

#### SECOND TO ONE

Durant is inspired by James, but their rivalry has been one-sided of late: Dating back to the 2012 Finals, Miami has won six straight against the Thunder—by an average of 7.8 points.

assigned to him, planted one hand on Durant’s rib cage and another on his back. “What do I tell a guy in that position?” asks an NBA assistant coach. “I shake his hand and say, ‘Good luck.’”

Durant faced up against Wright, tucked the ball by his left hip and swung his right foot behind the arc, toe-tapping the floor like a sprinter searching for the starting block. Durant had scored 35 points, but on the previous possession he fed Westbrook for a three, and on the possession before that he set up a three by Kevin Martin, who had arrived from Houston in the Harden trade. It was time for the Durant dagger, but before he shimmied his shoulders and unfurled his arms he spotted guard Thabo Sefolosha, ignored in the left corner. Sefolosha was 1 for 6, and in the previous timeout Durant had told him, “You’re going to make the next shot.” Durant could have easily fired over Wright and finished the Sixers, but he let his mind wander to the ultimate destination, seven months away. *I’m going to need all these guys to get to the Finals,* he thought.

Durant took one dribble to his left, and center Lavoy Allen rushed up to double him at the free throw line. He dribbled twice more, to the left edge of the key, and two other Sixers slid over. Surrounded by four defenders, Durant finally shoved to Sefolosha, so open that he feared he might hesitate. He didn’t. Durant jabbed him in the chest as the ball slipped through the net.

How about them apples? □